

BEWARE OF VISUALIZATION PRAYER

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The following is excerpted from **CONTEMPLATIVE MYSTICISM: A POWERFUL ECUMENICAL BOND**. ISBN 978-1-58318-113-3. Contemplative mysticism, which originated with Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox monasticism, is permeating every branch of Christianity today, including the Southern Baptist Convention. In this book we document the fact that Catholic mysticism leads inevitably to a broadminded ecumenical philosophy and to capitulation to heresies. For many, this path has led to interfaith dialogue, Buddhism, Hinduism, universalism, pantheism, panentheism, even goddess theology. One chapter is dedicated to exposing the heresies of Richard Foster: “Evangelicalism’s Mystical Sparkplug.” We describe major contemplative practices, such as centering prayer, visualizing prayer, the Jesus Prayer, *Lectio Divina*, and the labyrinth. We look at the history of Roman Catholic monasticism which birthed contemplative prayer, and we examine the errors of contemplative mysticism. In the Biographical Catalog of Contemplative Mystics we look at the lives and beliefs of 60 of the major figures in the contemplative movement, including Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross, Brennan Manning, Thomas Merton, Teresa of Avila, Richard Foster, and Dallas Willard. The book contains an extensive index. 482 pages. Available in print and eBook editions from Way of Life Literature, www.wayoflife.org.

Visualization Prayer By David Cloud

Visualization or imaginative prayer is becoming popular throughout evangelicalism because of spread of Roman Catholic contemplative mysticism.

Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello calls it “fantasy prayer” and says that many of the Catholic saints practiced it (*Sadhana: A Way to God*, pp. 79, 82, 93). Francis of Assisi imagined taking Jesus down from the cross; Anthony of Padua imagined holding the baby Jesus in his arms and talking with him; Teresa of Avila imagined herself with Jesus in His agony in the garden.

This type of thing is an integral part of the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. The practitioner is instructed to walk into biblical and extra-biblical historical scenes through the imagination and bring the scene to life by applying all of the senses: seeing the events, hearing what people are saying, smelling, tasting, and touching things--all within the realm of pure imagination. The visualizing prayer practitioner is even taught to insert himself into the scene, talking to the biblical characters and serving them. Ignatius encourages practitioners, for example, to imagine themselves present at Jesus’ birth and crucifixion.

Consider some excerpts from Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*:

“Imagine Christ our Lord present before you upon the cross, and begin to speak with him ...” (*The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, Vintage Books edition, First Week, 53).

“Here it will be to see in imagination the length, breadth, and depth of hell. ... to see in imagination the vast fires, and the souls enclosed ... to hear the wailing ... with the sense of smell to perceive the smoke ... to taste the bitterness ... to touch the flames” (First Week, fifth exercise, 65-70).

“I will see and consider the Three Divine Persons, seated on the royal dais or throne of the Divine Majesty ... I will see our Lady and the angels saluting her. ... [I will see] our Lady, St. Joseph, the maid, and the Child Jesus after His birth. I will make myself a poor little unworthy slave, and as though present, look upon them, contemplate them, and serve them...” (Second Week, 106, 114).

“While one is eating, let him imagine he sees Christ our Lord and His disciples at the table, and consider how He eats and drinks, how He looks, how He speaks, and then strive to imitate Him” (Third Week, 214).

Thomas Merton gave an example of visualization prayer in his book *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*. He suggested that the individual use this technique to communicate with the infant Jesus in His nativity.

“In simple terms, the nativity of Christ the Lord in Bethlehem is not just something that I make present by fantasy. Since He is the eternal Word of God before whom time is entirely and simultaneously present, the Child born at Bethlehem ‘sees’ me here and now. That is to say, I ‘am’ present to His mind ‘then.’ It follows that I can speak to Him as to one present not only in fantasy but in actual reality. This spiritual contact with the Lord is the real purpose of meditation” (p. 96).

Merton claims that this type of thing is not “fantasy,” but it is nothing other than fantasy. It is true that Christ is eternal, but nowhere are we taught by the Lord or His apostles and prophets that we should try to imagine such a conversation. What Merton suggests is gross presumption.

Richard Foster recommends visualizing prayer in his popular book *Celebration of Discipline*:

“Imagination opens the door to faith. If we can ‘see’ in our mind’s eye a shattered marriage whole or a sick person well, it is only a short step to believing that it will be so. ... I was once called to a home to pray for a seriously ill baby girl. Her four-year-old brother was in the room and so I told him I needed his help to pray for his baby sister. ... He climbed up into the chair beside me. ‘Let’s play a little game,’ I said. ‘Since we know that Jesus is always with us, let’s imagine that He is sitting over in the chair across from us. He is waiting patiently for us to center our attention on Him. When we see Him, we start thinking more about His love than how sick Julie is. He smiles, gets up, and comes over to us. Then let’s both put our hands on Julie and when we do, Jesus will put His hands on top of ours. We’ll watch and imagine that the light from Jesus is flowing right into your little sister and making her well. Let’s pretend that the light of Christ fights with the bad germs until they are all gone. Okay!’ Seriously the little one nodded. Together we prayed in this childlike way and then thanked the Lord that what we ‘saw’ was the way it was going to be” (*Celebration of Discipline*, 1978, p. 37).

This is not biblical prayer; it is occultism. New Thought practitioners and New Agers have practiced this type of thing for a century. Biblical prayer is not the attempt to accomplish

things. There is a vast difference between these two practices, as vast as the difference between God and the Devil.

Visualization prayer has become very popular within the modern contemplative movement, but it is heretical. I have already mentioned some reasons for saying this, but let me summarize them as follows:

First of all, visualization prayer is disobedience. The Bible contains everything we need for faith and practice. It is able to make the man of God “*perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works*” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Bible contains everything we need in order to learn how to pray correctly, and it says nothing whatsoever about imagination prayer. This is not the type of prayer that Jesus taught us to pray (Matthew 6:9-15).

Second, visualization prayer is vain and foolish because it is pure fantasy. We can’t imagine Jesus’ birth beyond the simple facts described in Scripture. We don’t know what Mary or Joseph or baby Jesus or the room or the manger or the angels or the shepherds or the wise men looked like. We don’t know what they said to one another. We don’t know the air temperature or the exact smells and tastes. If I try to imagine such things, I am entering into the realm of vain fantasy.

Third, visualization prayer is not faith. Faith is not based on imagination; it is based on Scripture. “*So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*” (Romans 10:17). God has given us everything we need in Scripture and our part is to believe what God says. “*But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name*” (John 20:31). We have everything we need to know about Christ for the present dispensation in the Scripture, and we accept it by faith. “*Whom HAVING NOT SEEN, ye love; in whom, THOUGH NOW YE SEE HIM NOT, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory*” (1 Peter 1:8).

Fourth, visualization prayer is presumptuous because it goes beyond divine revelation. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, “*The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.*” By going beyond what the Bible says and trying to delve into history through the imagination, I am leaving the revealed things and entering the secret things.

Fifth, visualization prayer is dangerous. It is dangerous because it adds to Scripture. If I get in the habit of visualizing Bible scenes, I can easily think that my visualizations are authoritative. I can fall into Rome’s error of accepting extra-biblical revelation. It is also dangerous because demonic entities can involve themselves in my vain imaginings. Satan influenced Peter’s thinking (Mat. 16:22-23), and he can certainly influence mine if I venture into forbidden realms.

Consider an example given by emerging church leader Tony Jones in his book *The Sacred Way*. His friend Mike King made John 1:37-39 the focus of contemplative practices at a spiritual retreat. While practicing the Ignatian exercise of imaginative prayer, he put himself into the biblical scene. He imagined himself sitting around John’s breakfast fire with the disciples, listening as they carried on an imaginative conversation. He imagined seeing Jesus approach and embrace John. He imagined hearing them tell stories of their childhood. He imagined them

imagined Jesus getting up and leaving, with John's two disciples following. He imagined them walking into the desert and coming to a clearing, when suddenly the imagined Jesus turned around and began interacting with him.

"When Jesus turned around, the two disciples of John whom I was following parted like the Red Sea and Jesus came right up to me, face to face. Jesus looked past my eyes into my heart and soul: 'Mike, what do you want?' I fell at the feet of Jesus and wept, pouring my heart out" (*The Sacred Way*, p. 79).

Notice that the imaginative prayer practitioner feels at liberty to go far beyond the words of Scripture to fantasize about the passage, creating purely fictional scenes. And observe that the *Jesus* that he imagines (which is certainly *not* the Jesus of the Bible, because we do not know what that Jesus looks like and nowhere are we instructed to imagine seeing him) takes on a life of its own and interacts with him. This is either pure mental fiction and therefore absolutely meaningless, or it is a demonic visitation akin to a vision of Mary.

King says that he was powerfully affected by this imagined event. "That day changed me profoundly and is something I will have for the rest of my life, for Jesus said, 'Come, and you will see...'"

He thus pretends that Jesus actually said this directly to him, when in fact he only imagined it in a purely fictitious sense. What incredible delusion!

Following is an example from Youth Specialties, a large evangelical youth ministry. They encourage young people to imagine a conversation with Jesus along the following line:

It's a normal day like any other. You're busy doing what you do. But as you go about your daily routine, you sense someone wanting to spend time with you. He wants you to come to him. He wants you to be with him. You definitely recognize his voice, but it's been a while since you've spent any real time together. Doesn't he know how busy your life can be? After all, you've been busy doing what you do.

He sits there, hunkered down in the corner of your room waiting for you. He's certainly not pushing himself on you, but you can definitely tell he longs to spend some time with you. You tell him that you don't think you'll have time to meet with him today as you head out the door again.

When you get back from your day, he's there again, waiting for you. He smiles at you as you come in the door and asks you how your day has been. He invites you to sit down and rest for a while. You can tell he wants to hear about your day and everything else you've got going on in your life. He seems very proud of who you are becoming. He asks you about what seems to be pressing in on you and weighing you down. You can tell he genuinely cares about you. He wants what's best for you. So you finally decide to sit down for a few minutes to talk with him.

You start by telling him that you can't talk long because you still have a lot to do before bedtime. But after a few minutes of talking together, your whole world and all the worries of your day seem to simply melt away. You haven't felt this relaxed in a long time. You find yourself pouring your heart out to him. And then he looks you right in the eyes and tells you how proud he is of you. He tells you how much he loves you and enjoys spending time together.

At that moment you realize this friend who has been waiting to talk with you day after day is Jesus. He has never made you feel guilty about blowing him off day after day. He looks at you and smiles. It's at that moment that you can tell for the first time in your life that you have a true friend who cares about you for who you are. The time seems to fly by as you continue talking together late into the night ("Something for Your Heart: Guided Meditation," Youth Specialties Student Newsletter #330, Feb. 25, 2008).

This is heretical foolishness. The Lord Jesus Christ is not hunkered down in someone's bedroom. He is enthroned in heaven at the right hand of the Father. He is not a non-judgmental Big Buddy who exists to build up my self-esteem. He is the Lord of Glory. He is exceedingly kind and compassionate, but He does not exist to pamper me; I exist to glorify Him!

Observe that this guided meditation mentions nothing about the confession of sin or repentance from sin, nothing about the necessity of obedience and walking in the fear of God and separation from evil in order to maintain fellowship with Christ. The Bible, though, says:

"If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:6-9).

Calvin Miller claims that "imagination stands at the front of our relationship with Christ."

"I drink the glory [of Christ's] hazel eyes ... his auburn hair. ... What? Do you disagree? His hair is black? Eyes brown? Then have it your way. ... His image must be real to you as to me, even if our images differ. The key to vitality, however, is the image" (*The Table of Inwardness*, InterVarsity Press, 1984, p. 93).

Each individual can therefore have the christ of his own making through the amazing power of imagination!

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